

threat / Coercion
(WP)

19 April 1988

BEYOND COERCION

right?

--Coercion is conceptualized (by an economist, using standard utility model) as inducing compliance by influencing the subject's "rational choice," his perceptions of his alternatives and their consequences and utilities, and in particular his subjective probabilities for particular consequences as these depend on expectations of one's own choices or responses.

But this misses several characteristics of coercion as it is commonly understood (and practiced), because the standard economic utility model abstracts from important practical distinctions (in effect, it claims, wrongly, that they are not really of practical significance or "reality," that they lack "operational meaning"; Kahneman and Tversky show that this is not true, in a gambling context, and I argue here that this is also true for a coercion context).

In ordinary usage, the notion of "coercion" involves increasing the subject's (victim's) expectation of "negative," "bad" consequences if he opposes one's wishes or demands. If he fails to comply, he will be "punished." This does not mean merely that he will do worse, relatively, than if he does comply; that could be posed by improving the reward if he does comply, creating a differential that is "compelling" to his rational choice; and indeed the economic model would include this approach in its notion of "coercion".

In fact, in the economic model it would be impossible, formally, to distinguish, in the final representation, between a decision problem in which one outcome has been worsened (as compared to an earlier problem) relative to another, from one in which the other payoff has been improved. Only relative payoffs are supposed to "matter"; "utility is determined (only) up to a linear transformation"; there is no "privileged, absolute, meaningful zero," relative to which other outcomes are either "good" or "bad."

But in ordinary usage, which is in fact more realistic, a subject does in fact frame a situation in such a way (though this is open to change, possibly to choice, and to manipulation) that there is a "status quo," and what is seen as coercion usually involves threats of damage or loss relative to that status quo, fears of possible worsening.

K/S
after
ms
there

And the word "fear" is not just a formalism; it refers to a feeling, an emotion (not merely a "cold" "expectation" or calculation of a relatively worsened outcome, such as a computer or robot could compute or "learn" or "hear". Thus it is an emotional state of the organism, usually associated with the anticipation of another emotional state--pain--or with a physical state, harm, damage, destruction, loss of capability or structure

Terror

humiliation

(loss of face, prestige, status, self-esteem)

or integrity. The usual concept of coercion does associate certain alternatives with "fear" in this emotional sense, often by posing the possibility of physical violence, intended to cause pain or harm (which may include death). These are expectations that are not merely "worse, less delightful, less preferred" than others; they are expectations that cause the undesired emotions of fear, terror, dread, anxiety (and perhaps shame, anger, horror, humiliation), emotions that in turn have various consequences.

is anticipation

Neither these feelings/emotions nor their consequences are really conceptualized or analyzed at all in economic models of "rational choice," which presume that all "reasonable, survival and welfare oriented behavior" is "chosen" as if one were choosing among outcomes of varying degrees of "goodness," all assuring survival and comfort, all improvements over one's present, agreeable situation.

so while
depend on:
1) status quo;
2) cost;

--The objective of coercion is to compel, or cause, certain behavior in the subject; it is not usually important that this behavior issue from a "rational choice among given alternatives." If the notion of "coercion" is to be limited to the latter form of influence, then it is usually just one possible means toward the general aim: not usually the only nor the best means of getting the desired behavior.

2) emotional
significance
3) content

It might be seen as fourth best. Better is to influence the subject's awareness or attention so as to shape his sense of possible alternatives, so as to exclude from his consideration certain alternatives (rather than to affect his calculation of their possible consequences, while perceiving them as possibly available to him and worthy of consideration). Better yet, to make him believe he "has no choice," no available alternative to the course one desires him to follow.

Best is to have him simply follow, unreflectively and unquestioningly, the course one suggests or demands: to accept one's authority or leadership, to respond to one's wishes or orders, obediently, "slavishly" (perhaps with, or perhaps without, a subjective sense of security and freedom, his sense of identity with one's own desires).

rather?
me?

This last, best situation is not imagined in the economic analysis of coercion; it does not presume "rational, calculated" behavior in the subject. To say that is to recognize that the usual model of rational behavior presumes autonomy, freedom, independence, personal responsibility, on the part of the rational subject. It simply ignores behavior that is responsive or obedient to authority, that is to some degree managed by a superior in a hierarchy: which is, for most urban people, most of their "work" behavior (and a good deal of their "play" and family behavior).

Only in exceptional circumstances is a boss "coercing" her

subordinates, even though some form of coercion may underly this and most authority relationships; it is in the background, fundamental in some sense, but not shaping the hour-to-hour and week-to-week interactions. Alternatives to obedience, to the acceptance of certain "givens" set by the boss or the institution or the overall relationship, are simply not present in awareness or effectively influencing responses, most of the time.

Coercion, then, tends to involve relative "equals,"--even when the disparity in power between the two parties may be very great, effectively asymmetrical--as distinct from a situation (far more desirable for at least one party) in which one party acts as if he is a subordinate in a hierarchical relationship, as if he were responding obediently to the authority of the other.

Certain forms of coercion may be a precursor to this latter relationship, aiming to induce it, in practical performance and subjectivity, whether or not it is ever to be formalized and recognized as "legitimate," representing "willing acceptance of one's right to command."

[Wednesday, April 20, 1988: news: Dukakis wins New York primary yesterday; Kuweiti hostages released late last night)

Correction of above: A boss or authority often does, of course, coerce. The essence of the situation is that threats are only one-way; only the boss has the "right" to threaten. For an erstwhile subordinate to make threats is to challenge the basic relationship (as when a union enters the picture, introducing two-way bargaining). (Thus, as Sloan points out in The State as Terrorist (Stohl and Lopez) p. Latin American landowners and economies depend on "docile, low-paid" peasant labor, and anything likely to lead to the mobilisation of peasants, and their subsequent bargaining behavior, is regarded as "subversive," and is subjected to terrorism).

An aspect of "authority" in general is the acknowledged (by both; or claimed, by the "superior\authority) "right" of one-way coercion. In the case of the state, it claims a monopoly of legitimate violence (including the right to deprive citizens of the means of violence.

A monopoly of the means of violence confers a capability to "terrorize" citizens: to threaten or carry out "disproportionate" violence (indeed, violence will be almost necessarily disproportionate if the targets have no means of violence, or very little: as with the rock-throwing Palestinians, or the Iranians under the Shah); or violence against unarmed civilians, "innocents"; thus, violence unconstrained by law or morality. Yet, although states (thus, the UN) claim the right to carry out domestic sanctions without fear of external sanction, which would violate "sovereignty" and "equality of states" and "non-intervention," actually exercising this right may risk losing an

image and recognition of the state as legitimate and sovereign, justifying revolution or humanitarian intervention ("outlaw status").

The very possession of the means of violence, especially massive violence (such as an air force, or nuclear weapons) is a "badge" or symbol of authority, vis-a-vis neighbors, citizens, or subordinate states or regions that do not possess such means: a hierarchical relationship in which uncalculated, unquestioning, reliable and prompt ("willing") obedience is expected, by "right" (or at least, in practice).

Thus, the U.S. claims the right to have the only offensive airforces in the Central American region; or to supply a chosen proxy, such as Honduras with these, directly or through proxies such as Israel or France. Sales or grants of offensive airplanes or defensive aircraft effective against offensive aircraft to Nicaragua is "forbidden," with the highly credible sanction/threat that Migs, if introduced, will be destroyed by US air attack.

Nicaragua is simply denied this aspect of sovereignty, of purchasing or accepting a capability either to threaten its neighbors or of defending against US or Honduran threats. The aim is not really to prevent attacks or threats against its neighbors (though this is the claim): these are effectively ruled out (except, perhaps, for a one-shot, desperate retaliation: not very damaging, lacking nuclear weapons) by the enormous disparity in power of the US. The point is to symbolise the hegemonial role of the US, the subordinate position of the Nicaraguans in the region. And more practically, to keep the Nicaraguans from defending their own airspace against penetration even by low-tech ~~penetration by~~ "covert" or Honduran planes for reconnaissance and supply flights for contras, an amazing expression and reality of asymmetry and denial of sovereignty.

Israel

Likewise, Israel seeks to preserve a recognized, accepted (though not openly acknowledged: Israel cannot realistically aspire to this, which would be still better for it, but which Arab publics would not, presumably, permit their states to accept) monopoly of possession of nuclear weapons, both as a badge and a realistic underpinning of hegemony in the region.

According to Stohl (The State as Terrorist, p. 45), "Israel's destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 sent a message to both the Iraqis and Israel's other Arab neighbors...about the likely impact of a decision to go ahead with a nuclear weapons program: They would face the likely prospect of an Israeli attack." In other words, Israel will act to preserve its monopoly.

"he will not be quiet - and it will not be quiet to him"

This suggests the nature of certain "mental reservations" that may give some validity, in Israeli minds, to their otherwise blatantly false formula, "Israel will not be the first to

introduce nuclear weapons into the region." This means, in effect (and perhaps, consciously or semi-consciously in the minds of Israeli spokesmen or their bosses): "Israel will not be the first of several states to acquire nuclear weapons, we will not be merely the first, we mean to assure that there is no second nuclear state in the Middle East. Israel will not be the first, it will be the only state to introduce nuclear weapons into the region." The implication is the same as in Vince Lombardi's formula: "Winning is not the most important thing; it's the only thing." *of several*

Conversely, for an erstwhile subordinate individual or nation or group or region to acquire a capability for violent coercion--still more, to use it, in threats or attack--is for it to challenge this prior or claimed relationship of authority or hegemony, to assert a new relation of "equality under the law," equality of "right" (of coercion, or "self"-defense). *C-II*

As a young, prospective gunslinger would find in the West, the early stage of asserting this new status is dangerous. The period immediately after strapping the gun openly on one's belt--or of joining the nuclear club (as Iraq sought to do, and Libya attempts)--is dangerous, as those who have until then monopolized the claim and the basis of hegemony seek to punish the claim/pretension, to remove the badge, and to destroy the capability. *C-II*

Thus, the extreme danger of "disappearance," torture/mutilation, and death faced by organizers of peasants or workers in Latin and Central America (or other Third World parts of the US' indirect empire, the "Free World"). Terrorism, disproportionate, antinomian in means and target (defying moral and international and domestic law and sanction), is regarded not only as available and effective, but as symbolically and psychologically "appropriate, correct--required, dutiful" response of authority to such challenge to its status: a symbolic, as well as practical, assertion of authority, of right, of status. Indeed--although the challenge usually reflects a prior history of experience of humiliation in the challenger--it is felt by the erstwhile authority/superior as an actual or potential/threatened humiliation of itself, the kind of loss or defeat for which disproportionate, "lawless," "irrational," terroristic revenge is called for and emotionally satisfying. *g-11*

The authority seeks, in face of this challenge, not merely to "retaliate" (as among equals), but to "punish": the action of a superior, an authority, one who has a unique right to hurt the other (perhaps because of an overwhelming power to do so, thus the "right to command"), as in the case of a parent confronting a child, or still more, an infant.

What is to be "punished" is:

--the attempted possession of a capability for damage, for

*Conflict over
authority/territory*

*Hypo: non-state terrorism is an assertion of the
right to use the state's means against it!*

retaliation, threat, bargaining (e.g., organization for collective bargaining).

--violation of "law," not merely non-compliance (by an equal) of a demand or rejection of a threat.

But what, in particular, must be punished by violence, perhaps terroristic, is a "revolutionary" challenge, seeking to redefine or transform the basic hierarchical relationship: denial of one's authority, superiority, right to legislate or command. Thus, police believe that violence ("police brutality") is the appropriate, obligatory response to what they perceive as "lack of respect, defiance" towards a uniformed policeman. In this sense, Eastern Establishment members of the NSC (like McGeorge Bundy) reacted--psychologically, and in terms of a sense of role and duty--as global policemen with respect to what they saw as defiance by Hanoi and the NLF; or Reagan and Haig, with respect to the Sandinistas "in our own backyard" ("who--among our allies or our enemies or our clients--will respect us if we can't keep our own neighborhood under control?") ("...if we can't control our woman, our children...our blacks..."); or right now, with Noriega in "our Canal Zone." Likewise, Israel's response to any assertion of Palestinian nationality or "rights."

A group that is suffering dwindling authority, or facing numerous actual or potential challenges to its authority, may feel a need demonstratively to "punish" someone ("in the manner of authority": by right, disproportionately, peremptorily, unrestrainedly, neither expecting retaliation nor acknowledging the target's right to respond). This is what Marlene Dixon has called "the Suez syndrome" of a declining empire, now predictable in the US. (As Reagan officials said often in the early '80's, explaining pressures on Nicaragua, later on Libya and Grenada: "We need to win one somewhere; these are place we can win." Not merely win, but punish, humiliate). An earlier example: the Austro-Hungarian Empire's felt need to punish, to humiliate by successful ultimatum or attack, Serbia in 1914. Or Ford's attack on Cambodia in connection with the Mayaguez incident, or Reagan's attack on Grenada in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon. Aggression or terrorism, the attempt to humble or humiliate (to "kick ass") and to mock restraint, is the specific antidote to these feelings or reality of declining status. It is felt as a "duty", a requirement of station, and as an immediate psychological palliative, as much as or more than a rationally-calculated, evidentially-validated course to improve one's long-range prospects.

--All of the above can be seen as relating "deontological" considerations to "coercion." That is, one party acts on a sense of right or duty (and these are related to notions of authority, hierarchy, much more than ethicists tend to recognize or acknowledge), and/or seeks to shape the other party's sense of right, obligation, duty, authority, as well as or instead of

acting on or acting to shape consequential considerations.

--Neither coercion nor terrorism (which may seek to induce and exploit a "non-rational" state in certain others so that they will accept one's authority and behave obediently, not "calculatedly") may rely on the threat, "If you do not do what I want, I will harm you." It may rest on your belief: "If you do not do what I want, he will harm you," or "...he will harm someone you care about or who matters to someone else who has influence over you," where "he" may be an ally or proxy of mine, or even an enemy of mine or of you. (This is the form of the demand based on an offer of "protection," a "racket" when the perpetrator of harm is unspecified and may well be myself, an ally or someone under my influence.) Even when the threat is of an action by me, it may be (as when Reagan threatens Nicaragua) that "I will fake or claim a provocation by you, to which I will 'respond' violently."

In general terms, coercion can take the form: If you (A) don't do what I (B) want, (which may involve using your influence to make C do something: as in US pressures against SU, China to influence North Vietnam to influence the NLF, and direct pressures on NVN to this purpose; or US pressures on the SU, or its own allies, to influence Nicaragua): then I, or D (my proxy, or ally, or even my enemy or his proxy or ally) will harm either you, or E,

perhaps in order to threaten F (to coerce F or to induce a state of terror in F: other parts of the same target group as E, or some other group)

to get F or G to pressure you, or H (your proxy or ally, or your enemy)

to get you:

harmed

replaced

to "surrender" to me

to do what I want (e.g., to get C
to do what I want.

--To anticipate "consequences" of pain, physical damage or death, for oneself or one's family, is qualitatively different from contemplating changes in asset position or income or consumer goods associated with different "options". It may induce a "clinging to authority," even the authority threatening or inflicting such sanctions: a "non-rational" (yet perhaps, or perhaps not, "reasonable," survival-oriented) behavior, reproducing the infant's (ambivalent) relationship to all-powerful parents, especially Mother. Or, the prospect of "sinking into" this relationship, being "enslaved," especially by a foreign invader, may induce desperate, heroic, self-risking or self-sacrificing behavior to avert it, as if that early, vulnerable, totally dependent relationship (in everyone's background) were the worst evil imaginable, at least to be reexperienced as an adult.

Likewise, the prospect or experience of humiliation, loss, defeat, shame, revealed weakness, incompetence or dependency ("like a child") can reshape values, aims, "utilities," in ways that have little proportionate relation to associated, observable changes in asset positions or to associated statuses (as distinct from, changes in status). Thus, one may take desperate, reckless, potentially destructive/immoral/suicidal steps to avert a certain "asset position" or change in assets that is perceived as a humiliation, defeat, etc., far beyond what one would undertake or risk to avert that same position if it were not imposed or did not represent a failure for which one was shamefully or culpably responsible.

WJL

(Kahneman and Tversky): In effect, such a prospect "flattens out" the "negative utilities" of other bad prospects